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ABSTRACT

Noting that studies of media, culture, and consciousness assert wide-ranging connections among the three, this paper proposes a research program for investigating the media-consciousness-cultural link. Sections I and II provide a brief review of orality-literacy theories and communication theories. Section III proposes five areas of media interaction with the social self: cultural structures; social discourse; images of the self; autonomy, and models of social behavior. Accompanying examples in the paper are drawn primarily from the United States. Section IV presents conclusions which suggest that the proposed exploration would demand a great deal of careful historical work and suggests looking at narrative themes and narrative styles in addition to the five previously discussed areas. (Contains 38 references.) (NH)

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Media Echoes in the Development of the Social Self

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The use of the mass media and the patterns of media use inform a sense of the social self. How we see ourselves, how we judge ourselves, how we conceptualize social problems and issues, how we engage in talk--all of these take shape through the media.

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Media Echoes in the Development of the Social Self

Based on historical investigations, textual analyses, and even economic patterns, theories of orality and literacy postulate links between media, consciousness, and culture. Similarly, other theories of a changing media environment hold for a connection between the way people communicate and the way people live. All these theories seem to respond to a question that runs something like this, "What happens to human beings when a dominant medium of communication changes?" All seem to take for granted a systems-theoretic view that places communication within a larger whole: Changing one element affects all the others as well as the balances among them. The perspective of these theories leads inexorably to an examination of the contemporary world--what has happened (or is happening) to us, given the relatively recent and rapid shift in our communication media and technologies?

In this paper I shall propose what one might best regard as a research program. Rather than marshalling data for an extended argument, I shall briefly review some of the orality-literacy theories and some commonly accepted communication theories. On this basis I shall then suggest several areas in which we might look for data to support the claim that the contemporary world does indeed show marked shifts in patterns of consciousness and culture as seen in the social self--shifts correlated in some degree with the changes in communication media.

By "social self" in this paper, I mean the public manifestation of individual personalities--the readily observable things we do together. The "social self" then also encompasses human behavior directed toward social ends: debate, decision-making, self-presentation, rhetorical style, and so on.

I. Orality-Literacy Claims

In the early 1950s Harold Adams Innis first noted and called attention to some of the ways in which communication patterns affected cultural--especially political and economic--formations (1951). Cultures whose media allowed easy transportation spanned large areas; those whose media proved durable (though perhaps at the cost of transport) left more lasting monuments. He proposed a contrast between "space-binding" and "time-binding" civilizations.

Within a relatively short span around 1963, several others published works exploring what happens when a people become literate: Eric Havelock, Ernst Mayr, Marshall McLuhan, and Jack Goody and Ian Watt (Havelock, 1986, pp. 24-29). Examining ancient Greek writings, Havelock (1963) proposes a connection between the adoption of a written language and a shift in Greek thought towards the abstract. Key to some of these changes was the way information was stored and recalled. In a later work Havelock recounts his own contributions and notes that Mayr (1963) had argued that cultural information is stored in language "so that it can be reused as the child is taught by the parent or its society" (quoted in Havelock, 1991, p. 23). He continues, "The secrets of orality, then, lie not in the behavior of language as it is

exchanged in the give and take of conversation but in the language used for information storage in the memory" (p. 24). Writing, of course, changes that equation. McLuhan (1962) approaches the issue of language and orality more indirectly by noting the cultural shifts associated with the development of printing from moveable type. He contrasts those cultural experiences with earlier (and later) oral forms of culture, wrestling as he does so with the contemporary electronic media and their orality. Finally Goody and Watt (1968) call attention to oral forms, both in purely oral cultures and in oral enclaves in contemporary society (Havelock, 1986, p. 28).

Others see the impact of literacy in different domains. For example, Walter Ong (1982) has explored the ways in which "writing restructures consciousness." Among other things, writing leads to distance between the writer and reader, between the writer/reader and the text, and between the text and any context (pp. 78-102). Printing reinforces that separation and emphasizes sight over hearing. It fixes words in space, allowing indexing, standardization, and exact reproduction (pp. 124-132). It also leads to changes in narrative structures and a growth of interiority (Ong, 1986).

Although J. Peter Denny (1991) rejects the strong claim Ong makes for writing's effect on consciousness, he acknowledges that literacy fosters decontextualization. This separation of words or thought-units from one another happens through the isolation of texts from the living world of oral discourse. Even

this weaker claim reflects the idea that something did change with a change in communication pattern.

Brian Stock (1983) illustrates how these changes might occur. He traces some effects of literacy in a medieval period that witnessed a growing educated class. Among the effects he includes the growth of textual communities, a shifting attitude towards "reality" and symbols, a philosophical methodology that included hermeneutics, and a sense of distance from historical events--i.e., a sense that things and events were now mediated by texts. The effects of literacy are not at all direct but get mediated through "social organization." "Where there are texts, there are also presumably groups to study them. The process of learning and reflection inevitably influences the members," in dealing with one another, in dealing with other groups, and in dealing with the world (p. 522).

Similarly, Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) catalogues some of the effects of printing upon culture. She fits into the category of those David Olson regards as interpreters "of cultural changes associated with changes in the forms of communication in terms of changed social and institutional practices while assuming that the cognitive processes of individuals remain much the same" (1991, p. 149). Her list of the implications of printing strengthens the case that something happened. Because printing led to multiple copies of a uniform printed page, printing affected the dissemination and preservation of materials; it also led to the standardization and reorganization of existing materials (Eisenstein, 1979, pp. 43-125). By allowing widespread distribution of previously limited texts, printing shifted religious debates

to a much more public forum while at the same time providing a popular audience with access to Biblical texts (pp. 320 ff.). Indirectly, this access to religious material affected political balances as public "functions were transferred from churchmen to commoners" (p. 406). Even within church circles, balances of power shifted as printers determined whose works they would publish (pp. 415-421). These effects also spilled over into science; as technical writing found a wider audience, it led to a increased concentration on collective goals (p. 559) and changed various practices of illustration (p. 588).

Like Denny, others critical of the commonly held orality/literacy positions do grant that something happened, though they would hesitate to credit all to changes in media. David Olson and Nancy Torrance (1991, p. 1) sum up the position by quoting from one of their earlier works:

> The effects of literacy on intellectual and social change are not straightforward. . . . it is misleading to think of literacy in terms of consequences. What matters is what people do with literacy, not what literacy does to people. Literacy does not cause a new mode of thought, but having a written record may permit people to do something they could not do before--such as look back, study, re-interpret, and so on. Similarly, literacy does not cause social change, modernization, or industrialization. But being able to read and write may be vital to playing certain roles in an industrial society and completely irrelevant

> to other roles in a traditional society. (Olson, Hildyard, & Torrance, 1985, p. 14)

They and the contributors to their volume go on to argue that few changes in consciousness result from literacy or the techniques of literacy; oral cultures, they indicate, do possess complex thought patterns. At the same time, literacy and changes in dominant communication media do have some effect on culture.

The kinds of indirect changes in culture cluster into a constellation of sorts. Changes in information storage link with availability of information and recall, as well as with accuracy. Changing the form of information and its storage, as it shifts from narrative to lists, for example, links with critical evaluation, educational practice, research or scientific strategies, and interiority. The availability of information links with social groupings--the communities defined by stories or texts--and with interpretive strategies or information skills.

Overall, while those who examine orality, literacy, or changing communication media studiously avoid any causal implications, they do seem to assert three kinds of claims. First some hold for an association: certain kinds of thinking, for example, regularly appear with certain media. Second, others situate the changes in media or in communication methods in a kind of cultural matrix: certain patterns of cultural or institutional practices crystallize out of given situations; there could be others but these have occurred. Third--perhaps a weaker form of the above--historians of technology, communication, and culture notice what James Burke (1978) termed "connections": one thing just leads to another.

II. Meyrowitz and Claims for Electronic Media

Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) argues for similar connections in regards to the electronic media and social behavior. Building on the work of Goffman and McLuhan, he analyzes how these media change behavior by changing social situations:

> The situational analysis offered here describes how electronic media affect social behavior--not through the power of their messages but by reorganizing the social settings in which people interact and by weakening the once strong relationship between physical place and social "place." (p. ix)

He argues that the electronic media "have led to the overlapping of many social spheres that were once distinct" (p. 5) and that this shift in turn leads to changes in social behavior. Social groups, socialization, and authority all depend on how people interact; therefore he looks to these places for the noticeable impact of the electronic media.

Not surprisingly, some question his analysis. Robert Kubey (1992) critically re-examines his reading of the evidence, argues that he puts too much emphasis on "the media's display of Goffmanian 'backstage' behaviors as the explanation for [the] mergings" of social categories, and proposes that the phenomena he adduces in support of his thesis can be explained by other means (p. 260). He also notes that Meyrowitz gives little consideration to "highly relevant literature that could be used to explain many of the "homogenization phenomena" that he describes (p. 269). He continues:

> The one homogenization theory that does receive consideration is that of Gerbner and his colleagues who have provided evidence of what they call "mainstreaming": Because people share the same information via the mass media, the social and political attitudes of heavy viewers of television will be more alike than will be those of light viewers, this in spite of political background. (p. 269)

Kubey notes that other social theorists have connected mass communication products with cultural homogenization without relying on Meyrowitz's theoretical model: the Frankfurt School, especially Marcuse, Adorno, and Lowenthal.

Whatever the verdict on his work, Meyrowitz and his critics do, however, point us toward social behavior as a potential site for examining the impact of the contemporary changes in communication patterns. In this they rely on theorists familiar to communication researchers: symbolic interactionists like George Herbert Mead (1934), who held that society shapes individuals through communicative exchanges; early sociologists like Robert Park and E. W. Burgess (1924), who saw communication as the defining means of social interaction; the Frankfurt School theorists mentioned above, who explored the impact of mass culture products; sociologists like Hugh Dalziel Duncan (1962/1985), who examined social interaction from the perspective of communication; and anthropologists like Gregory Bateson (1972), who calls attention to public behaviors as specifically communicative behaviors. Had they wished they could have added to this list rhetorical critics like Kenneth Burke (1945, 1969), whose dramatistic analysis presumes social interaction

through communicative roles, and psychologists like Albert Bandura (1977), whose social learning theory grounds so much media effects research.

All of these research traditions point to the "social self" as the locus for the impact of the media. Moreover, and perhaps not surprisingly, almost the entire "effects tradition" of mass communication research presumes that the electronic media do indeed influence the social self. Even posing questions about children's learning, the effects of viewing violence, or the efficacy of advertising reflects an intuitive sense that the electronic mass media must have some effect, which can be measured, tested, and perhaps harnessed. It is to these areas that I turn now to mark out the ground for searching for media echoes in the development of the social self.

III. Some Research Sites

Electronic media interact with the social self in a variety of ways, none of which I would claim to be directly causal. We do, however, find echoes of the media in contemporary life in ways that reflect a varied cultural mix. "Examination of the media in different societies shows that their structure, contents, and audiences differ according to their cultural, legal, and economic features" (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986. p. 14). Even so, each society shows some connection to its media, a connection more clearly seen by an examination of social interaction.

> The media audience is not to be understood as mere consumers who passively accept anything that the media offer, but as active individuals

> and members of social groupings who consume media products in the context of their personal and social goals. In modern societies, that means quite a lot. Because the media system plays such an important role in society, linking the audience to all its various institutions, it is necessarily the case that the media will play important social and personal roles in individual and collective life. (Ball-Rokeach & Cantor, 1986, pp. 17-18)

It is at this junction of media with social and personal roles that we might more profitably search for evidence of what happens when we change the media mix from printed materials to electronic ones.

In this section I propose five areas of media interaction with the social self; while the accompanying examples come primarily from the United States, other contemporary cultures may well reflect similar trends. The five areas are (a) cultural structures, (b) social discourse, (c) images of the self, (d) autonomy, and (e) models of social behavior.

A. Cultural Structures

In his analysis of "how culture works," Michael Schudson (1989) argues for five dimensions of cultural potency. In order for a culture object "to influence a person, it must reach the person" (p. 160) with enough rhetorical force to make it memorable (p. 164) so that it can resonate with the audience (p. 167); moreover, it must achieve a certain degree of institutionalization or positioning within the structures of common

reference (p. 170) and be action-oriented (p. 171). "To say that a cultural object is more powerful the more it is within reach, the more it is rhetorically effective, the more it resonates with existing opinions and structures (without disappearing entirely into them so as to have no independent influence to exert), the more thoroughly it is retained in institutions, and the more highly resolved it is toward action, helps provide a language for discussing the differences in influence of different aspects of culture" (p. 175). Because Schudson's focus is the mass media, his schema also helps to identify how the media interact with and re-shape cultural structures.

First, the electronic media increase the information available to members of the culture. The whole dynamic movement of the electronic media is geared to increasing information sources and the speed of information retrieval--from radio station competition to multi-channel cable systems to electronic databases. They also shape the information according to carefully measured rhetorical forms, both for ease of access and for greater resonance with existing information. This may not change the characteristic patterns of people's thought but it certainly affects the social self by providing a sea of information to surround it.

Second, because there is so much more information, the electronic media have indirectly affected how people deal with it. Timothy Gower reports that people switch attention more quickly--or choose to focus intently--depending on the matter at hand (1993, pp. 18-19). Some media reinforce attention strategies:

> Greenfield co-authored a study in which undergraduate males were asked to play Robotron, a computer game that requires frenzied self-

> defense, for five hours before being tested against a control group to measure their ability to react to two different impulses on a video screen in a laboratory.
>
> The Robotron players were better at monitoring both impulses simultaneously than the non-players. "[Playing video games] improves strategies for deploying attention, not simply reaction time," says Greenfield, who confesses she's not quite sure how the Robotron whizzes managed to divide their attention so effectively. (Gower, 1993, p. 18)

Other media provide the links to diverse materials through editing techniques, voice-overs, quick cuts, and intriguing images. The media themselves take on the role of providing resonance and action-orientation.

Third, some electronic media, particularly television but also computers, have increased the incidence of images within the culture. Certainly there are more images and the images themselves have become more significant. These become both a "rhetorical form" and a kind of institutionalization--images, through their repetition become cultural icons, that is, part of the cultural structure. If writing and printing focused attention on language in a more direct way, then the electronic media highlight images. What people think about, how they *picture* the world, has changed because of the wealth of pictures of the world.

Fourth, the large-scale presence of the electronic media provides a different kind of institutionalization through reinforcing cognitive skills. This particular consequence of the media has appeared most clearly in studies of children's learning.

"The repeated utilization of certain mental activities allows children opportunities to practice and cultivate them as skills. . . . Activation of these processes or skills also is a means to other ends such as remembering and using aspects of television content in reasoning" (Meringoff, Vibbert, Char, Fernie, Banker, & Gardner, 1983, p. 152). In carefully controlled and monitored studies, Meringoff and her colleagues found "considerable evidence" for medium-specific effects on children's learning. Children not only remember visual content better but apply it differently "in their further reasoning about the material presented" (p. 173). These kinds of effects on learning indicate just one way in which the electronic media have affected cultural structures and, through them, the social self.

B. Social Discourse

Evidence of the ways in which electronic media affect the social self indirectly appears in public discourse. A great deal of media effects research has focused attention on this, particularly under the rubric of political communication. For example, the Langs note that the use of the electronic media have resulted in an increased personalization of politics and a nationalization of political discourse (1986, pp. 275-276). Both trends indicate a change in how we speak publicly. Prescinding from any political topics, these changes in discourse style argue for a concomitant change in focus: people attend more to the personal, to the image, to the general.

However, the logic of discourse has changed as well. Agenda-setting research repeatedly notes that the news media don't tell people how to think but what to think

about. The public sees significant issues appear before it and dissolve into other issues without a clear thread of continuity. Public discourse is fragmented and sometimes disjointed, perhaps unable to focus on one issue for long periods of time--it is unsustained discourse. Public discourse reduces complex issues to simple images, even sound-bites. One could ask whether this demonstration of public reason affects private reasoning as well.

Whether the electronic media have had an influence on the style of public discourse is more difficult to determine. Certainly that style has changed. People today would be hard pressed to listen to a typical 19th century political speech or to a 19th century sermon. Even though vestiges of that speaking style did survive into the 1950s, today it sounds both quaint and difficult. A newer style is more narrative, echoing perhaps the successful dramatic style of film and television.

That narrative also serves its own agenda-setting function. A good deal of social discourse takes as its topic the plots and adventures of televised drama. Even those who do not watch the programs know something of Murphy Brown, Roseanne, the 4077 M.A.S.H. unit, and so on. The sheer cultural presence of these narratives and characters leaves its mark on thought, values, and interaction. This aspect of public discourse shapes the social self by helping to define the social context. To put it another way, parasocial interaction influences social interaction.

Another indicator of how electronic media echo in the social self can be found in the various theoretical constructions of how audiences negotiate meanings. Stuart Hall (1980) has mapped out a process of negotiating meaning that indicates how

different groups can decode different meanings from media transmissions. Resisting a hegemonic viewpoint, for example, includes recognizing that "it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture" (p. 137). The positing (or resisting) of social relations introduces the social self into the act of watching television and thus makes it into a kind of social discourse. In addition, accepting a preferred reading or searching out an alternative meaning places audience members in relationship with the electronic "text" in particular ways. This need to so continuously negotiate meaning hones cognitive and interpretive skills to degrees seldom demanded before. Again, the volume and kinds of material does create a demand--perhaps only to be more critical or suspicious. Such hermeneutics belonged to only a few in past eras; its proliferation suggests that something has changed in our public discourse.

The social discourse of political and narrative communication therefore highlights another location in which we might search for connections between our media and ourselves.

C. Images of the Self

A third place in which we find media echoes in the development of the social self is in mediated images of the self. These images are as omnipresent as the media. One of the most compelling aspects of advertising, for example, is its presentation of human images: modelled clothes, modelled looks, modelled consumption. Like it or not, these images do seem to affect us.

Various studies inspired or informed by feminist perspectives have led the way in calling attention to the impact of images. Early collections like *Hearth and Home* (Tuchman, Daniels, & Benét, 1978) not only raise the question of the role of images but persuasively argue that mass media do indeed teach, shape, and distort social roles. Three very brief examples illustrate their point. (1) Sprafkin and Liebert review studies which "suggest that children's sex-role attitudes are influenced by televised sex-role portrayals" (1978, p. 231). They go on to report their own studies which both test the extent of this influence and attempt to explain it. (2) The shaping of social roles does not happen without context but often involves economic ends. In a content analysis of newspapers and female stereotypes, Gladys Lang notes, "a part of the press has collaborated with the fashion industry to create jet-set celebrities, the 'beautiful people.' These superconsumers can be used to promote every kind of conspicuous consumption" (1978, p. 149). Finally (3), the distortion of social roles runs as a theme through the book and is well summarized in the title of Tuchman's introductory essay, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media" (1978, pp. 3-38).

The concern with the power of mass media images on the self led in more recent years to a greater consciousness of the process of representation and to more sustained efforts to theoretically delineate its operation. Rosemary Betterton situates this from the feminist viewpoint:

> It has been argued that visual images, along with other cultural texts and practices, help to organize the ways in which we understand gender

> relations. The concept of representation has become a crucial one for the analysis of sexual politics in the 1970s and 1980s. . . . Thus novels, films, television, political speeches and news photographs all represent the world to us in ways which produce definite ideas about social reality. These, it has been argued, do not merely reflect existing realities but actually shape our perceptions of what that reality is. (1987, p. 8)

Stuart Ewen (1988) explores the same process of image-making and image effects from the perspective of style, tracing in particular how contemporary advertising has crafted a union between image and art, on the one hand, and commerce and consumption, on the other. For him, the focus for most advertising and style is on the social self. Expanding this perspective, Michael Smith notes how the concern for image affects the social reality of something even so seemingly immune as science and space exploration. "Missiles, astronauts, and lunar footprints simply provided a visually dramatic new iconography through which the real product could be conveyed: an image of national purpose that equated technological preeminence with military, ideological, and cultural supremacy" (1983, p. 177).

Examples of the media's influence on images of the self go beyond advertising and gender roles, of course. But the visibility of these areas makes them ideal as sources of data for an investigation into how changes in media echo in daily life.

D. Autonomy

Sometimes the electronic media have less direct effects on the formation of the social self. While these may be more difficult to gauge, they provide another possible site for reflection. In his review of television's impact on the social structure of Britain, Conrad Lodziak calls attention to the ways in which personal autonomy has shifted as a result of television.

> Before television's 'capturing' of their time, working-class boys, at least, developed some autonomy outside of the family sphere, though no doubt with the security of the family behind them. Lack of space and material resources often meant that boys were 'encouraged' to 'go out,' being left to their own devices to create their own fun in spaces well distanced from the heavy hand of authority, and beyond the socializing influence of adults.
>
> All this was to change with the coming of television. The cramped spaces of working-class homes, while repressive for mobile infants, are irrelevant for sedentary viewers of television. With the growth of daytime broadcasting, children were brought 'back inside' into the safety of the home. Now withdrawn from those adult-free spaces, which are vital for the development of autonomy, young children are undergoing a television-dominated childhood. The experience of watching television is far removed from the experience of self-motivated activity through which autonomy develops. (1986, p. 151)

In this instance the mass media affect the social self by what they replace. As alternative activities they change the cultural matrix in which the self develops.

E. Models of Social Behavior

The mass media also affect the social self by providing models of social behavior. This process has received classic theoretical description in Bandura's well known social learning theory (1977). Meyrowitz goes beyond this and suggests two other places for media influence on the social self: socialization and status.

Socialization has to do with the acquisition of social behaviors and roles and, as such, may well be learned according to Bandura's model. It also involves various degrees of access to the group's information--an access meted out slowly and in a highly controlled but ultimately arbitrary pace (Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 57-58). It is here that Meyrowitz places the impact of the electronic media. Group membership entails learning group roles and duties and thus demands an exposure to those roles. Even though this can occur through the media, Meyrowitz wisely cautions us not to seek direct effects.

> One of the reasons it is difficult to see the relationship between electronic media and changes in behavior is that media do not function in a vacuum. Electronic media are not the ultimate molders of behavioral changes. Old role structures may be undermined by new patterns of information flow, but new role structures can never be created by media; they must be created by people. As Cooley, Mead,

> and Goffman suggest, individuals gain perceptions of their own behavior when they see themselves as "social objects," that is, when they envision themselves as others would see them. New media may affect who performs before whom, where and when the performances take place, and the type of control over information that can be exercised, but the performer and audience are still people, and behavior is still *socially* defined. (pp. 173-174)

The electronic media then provide a condition for change as well as a repertoire of behaviors for imitation. The more people see these social behaviors as desirable and as role-defining, the more likely they will choose them.

Second, Meyrowitz cites research grounding orality-literacy theories in support of his claim that authority or status depends on controlling information. Changing media changes the possibilities for controlling information. "New conceptions of communication competence and new prerequisites for control over information tend to alter the relative political and social power of different people and various sectors of the population" (1985, p. 160). A few pages later he notes that social behavior, particularly social roles which define a given society, depend on implicit control.

> Of all social roles, those of hierarchy are affected most by new patterns of information flow. The loss of information control undermines traditional authority figures. Further, because information control is an *implicit* rather than an explicit aspect of high status, the changes in hierarchy are surrounded by confusion and despair. (p. 164)

The connection between information control, authority, and social behavior may seem less direct than some of the other media-social self links, but it illustrates the cultural matrix approach in searching for media effects.

IV

Studies of media, culture, and consciousness assert wide-ranging connections among the three. Varying in theoretical scope and power, they often leave one puzzled as to their utility. At the same time, empirical researchers have offered a wealth of studies detailing mass media effects. By briefly recounting a few of these studies, I have suggested that those interested in the media-consciousness-culture link might look for evidence for their views by examining the social self, public behaviors, and media forms.

This kind of exploration would demand a great deal of careful historical work, not only in the effects tradition but also in the development of culture. Guided by earlier work examining growth in literacy or the rise of printing, one might look at narrative themes and narrative styles in addition to the five areas I have sketched out above. The electronic media have become an undeniable part of the cultural matrix, as has a series of research traditions examining them. By merging the literatures of these traditions, we can both strengthen them and achieve a greater discernment of media echoes in the social self.

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